

LATEX ALLERGY

Products made of latex (natural rubber, often a tan natural color, thin and stretchy) can cause serious reactions in certain people. In some instances, death has occurred.

Who is at Risk?

Reactions can occur patients as well as in health care workers. Persons at highest risk are those with spina bifida, a congenital disorder of the spinal cord. An increasing number of patients with other disorders are experiencing difficulties with latex as well.

At second highest risk are health care workers.

Why at Risk?

It is felt that these two groups are at high risk because of frequent exposure to latex. Persons with spina bifida (myelomeningocele) frequently have had many surgeries and hospitalizations which have brought them in contact with much latex. They have, in the past, catheterized regularly with red, rubber catheters. Health care workers also have repeated exposure to latex.

Why is it Occurring?

Only in the last few years has this become a widespread problem. Latex products such as rubber gloves and condoms are used so much more now than in the past, due to the need for protection against HIV infection through the use of "universal precautions." To supply this increased demand, it may be that methods for processing latex have changed or that rubber trees are tapped at an earlier age. It is felt that something has changed, either in the raw material or in the processing, and that is why serious reactions to latex are occurring. The repeated, frequent exposure to the many products made of latex found in the hospital environment is considered to be contributing to this problem. Latex molecules can be found in the air as well.

Signs and Symptoms

Allergic Response

- Swelling, redness, itching, rash, hives
- Sneezing, nasal drip, itching eyes
- Difficulty breathing (tightness in chest, hard to catch breath)
- Unconsciousness
- Death

Important to know is that someone who has never had a reaction could change at any time to being a positive reactor.

Prevention

Because repeated exposure to latex, it is thought, contributes to the development of sensitivity, it is necessary for health care workers to use alternative products as often as is possible. The most significant way to do this is to use vinyl gloves in place of latex gloves. All patients with spina bifida (myelomeningocele) are cared for in a latex-safe environment at UTMC. The procedure, Latex Allergy (Perioperative), is described in Mosby's. Even those myelo patients who have not had a reaction in the past need to be under Latex Precautions, which serves as a preventative measure by reducing exposure.

Continued observation by each health care worker is necessary in order to locate products made of latex in his area. Assistance in determining the composition of an item is available by calling the myelo nurse or Materials Management department.

Alert your department manager and fill out an injury/illness report to document any reactions you have noted related to exposure to latex. Employees should refer to S-08-032 <http://www.utoledo.edu/depts/safety/docs/S-08-032.pdf> for more information on Latex sensitivity.